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## BEMIS PARK: A STUDY OF NEIGHBORHOOD CHANGE

BY

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### Introduction

The 1970's have been marked by a rebirth of inner city neighborhoods for commerce and housing. Developers in Boston, Washington and other cities have begun to rehabilitate old structures rather than destroy them, and thus preserve the visual character of neighborhoods. Residents of older neighborhoods have also banded together into homeowner's associations to lead the attempts to redevelop and rejuvenate their surroundings.<sup>1</sup> The viability of older central city neighborhoods has come to be recognized as essential to the economic health of the city as a whole. Older neighborhoods also can provide a sense of continuity with the past.

Bemis Park is one of Omaha's older residential neighborhoods. The area, north of Cuming between 33rd and 40th Streets, has known a rich past, but in recent years has also experienced deterioration. Bemis Park residents, however, have been unwilling to accept decline as inevitable, and have made strides to reverse the trend and to restore and preserve the qualities that made the area one of Omaha's most pleasant places to live. The history of the Bemis Park neighborhood and current efforts to restore it, the concerns of this article, demonstrate the extent to which a neighborhood's viability depends upon its residents.

Today as in the early decades of this century, the Bemis Park neighborhood contains approximately 200 households. The Bemis Park Neighborhood Association, organized in 1975, has been approved for Community Development Block Grant funds to repair public facilities and has recently discussed the possibilities of becoming a landmarks neighborhood with the Omaha Landmarks Heritage Preservation Commission. Many area residents have been instrumental in establishing the nonprofit Bemis Park Improvement Corporation, which has purchased and rehabilitated vacant homes in the area for resale.

### A History of the Bemis Park Neighborhood

*Establishment of Bemis Park.* Suburbanization in American cities began on a large scale in the late 19th century with the

advent of the trolley car, a cheap, efficient method of transportation which allowed both white and blue collar workers to live farther away from their place of work than walking distance. In Omaha, the suburbanization process began in earnest in the prosperous decade of the 1880's.

Bemis Park was established at the end of the Cuming Street trolley car line in the late 1880's. The decade brought new wealth to Omaha. During those years new industries such as the Union Stockyards began and older businesses like the Omaha Smelting Company and the local lead works expanded. The industrial growth swelled Omaha's population to 61,000 by 1885, almost double that of 1880.<sup>2</sup> By 1890 the population surpassed 102,000. Building values rose from less than a million dollars annually in 1880 to almost eight million dollars by 1890. In 1880, 5,110 dwellings stood in Omaha; by 1882, contractors had erected 1,000 more houses. In 1884 alone, 1,174 homes went up, and 1887, the high point of the boom, saw the construction of 2,179 residences.<sup>3</sup>

The real estate partnership of Bemis and Bowers advertised 200 houses and 1,000 lots for sale among its property of one million acres.<sup>4</sup> Among the firm's holdings was a 60 acre tract of land originally named College Place (now Bemis Park), west of the new Creighton College. The Bemis Park Company organized and incorporated on October 4, 1889, with George P. Bemis serving as president. Bemis' College Place development consisted of 48½ acres owned by him, along with 11½ acres belonging to Dr. Samuel D. Mercer, who held adjoining property west of Bemis Park. Alfred D. Edgerton, a landscape architect from Syracuse, New York, platted part of the tract for residences, but left a narrow ravine about 200 feet wide from 33rd to 36th Streets for donation to the City as a park.<sup>5</sup>

*Methodology.* The Bemis Park neighborhood was defined as the area from Cuming to Hamilton Streets between 33rd and 38th for examination between 1913-1940. The neighborhood is bounded by Bemis Park to the south and Mercer Park and

<sup>2</sup>James L. Olson, *History of Nebraska* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), pp. 201-202.

<sup>3</sup>Howard P. Chudacoff, *Mobile Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 14.

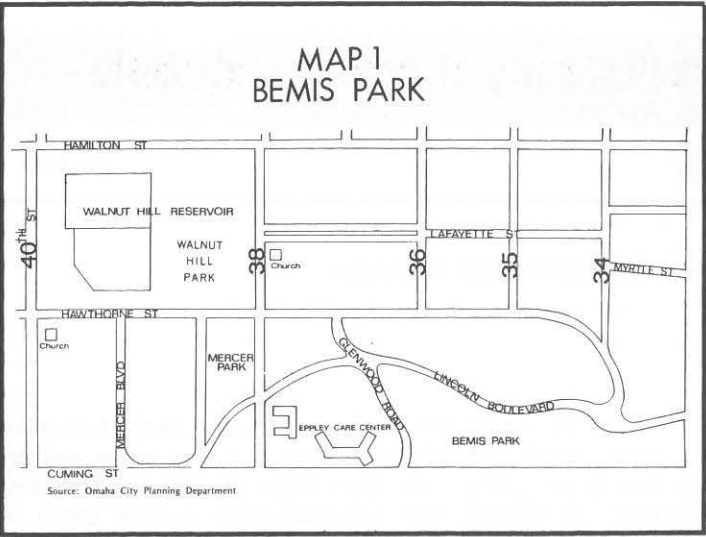
<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup>James Woodford Savage and J. T. Bell, *History of the City of Omaha, Nebraska, and South Omaha* (New York and Chicago: Munsell and Co., 1894), pp. 439 and 525.

<sup>1</sup>See Lawson B. Knott, Jr., "The Impact of Historic Preservation on Development and Land Use," *Urban Land* (July-August, 1975), pp. 4-7; and Daniel Q. Haney, Associated Press, "Young Professionals Worship Boston," *Omaha World-Herald* (May 1, 1977), for examples of revitalization in cities.



Walnut Hill to the west (Map 1).<sup>6</sup> The first difficulty lies in the definition of the term neighborhood. Sociologist Suzanne Keller listed four principal elements that led to the creation of neighborhoods in modern cities: “geographic boundaries, ethnic or cultural characteristics of the inhabitants, psychological unity among people who feel that they belong together, or concentrated use of an area’s facilities, for shopping, leisure, and learning.”<sup>7</sup> The designation of the Bemis Park area as a neighborhood was based on the geographic boundaries of the originally platted area, the psychological unity of the currently active neighborhood group and the focus provided by the area’s parks.



The history of a neighborhood is often difficult to trace. Any history of a city is more likely to concentrate on city politics or famous figures than on changes in a 12-block portion of the city. Because so little is recorded, the history of a neighborhood must be examined through the people who lived there. City directories provide one of the best ways to study neighborhood residents.

Since city directories provided the primary source material in this study, their exactness determined the accuracy of the results. In a study of persistence and mobility in the twentieth century city, *Mobile Americans*, Howard Chudacoff found the directories had relatively low rates of omission.<sup>8</sup>

Omaha R. L. Polk directories began in 1913 to list residents by both name and street address. Bemis Park residents were traced through directories at 5 year intervals from 1915 through 1940. Names and occupations of residents at each address in the Bemis Park neighborhood listed in the 1913 directory were first catalogued. The 1915 street listing was then consulted to determine which 1913 residents remained at the same addresses. New residents’ names and occupations were added. In addition, the destination of residents who had moved out of the area were checked in the alphabetical listing and new addresses recorded, if they could be located.

Results for each year were tabulated by listing householders under a variety of categories. A householder remaining in the same house since the last check period was listed under “persistence” and entered under the date when he was first recorded at that address. Both short-term persistence by 5 year intervals and long-term persistence from 1913 to 1940 were measured. This showed not only how many remained since the last check period, but how long people actually lived

<sup>6</sup>The Bemis Park Neighborhood Association boundaries include residences west of Mercer Park to 40th Street which were outside the original development. These dwellings were included in the boundaries for the later section on the current neighborhood.  
<sup>7</sup>Suzanne Keller, *The Urban Neighborhood* (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 87.  
<sup>8</sup>Chudacoff, p. 25.

in the neighborhood. Because of time limitations, only the 1913 group was charted for long-term persistence.

An attempt was also made to trace the destination of residents who moved from Bemis Park. Those who could not be found or traced (in the case of an extremely common name) or who had died in the previous year were designated “not listed.” The destinations of those who could be traced were subdivided into areas of the City to give a general idea of movement. Since in 1913 Omaha had not yet annexed any suburbs, the City boundaries ran from Grover Street on the south to Redick on the north and west to 48th Street. Thus, 24th Street and Dodge Street partitioned the City into four quadrants. Dundee, Benson, Florence and South Omaha were designated as suburbs from the beginning and residences within those areas remained listed as suburban through 1940. This provided data to check the extent to which Bemis Park was a way station for the socially mobile on their way out of the central city.<sup>9</sup>

*Persistence Varied With Economic Conditions.* The number of addresses recorded in the Bemis Park neighborhood between 1913 and 1940 totaled 213. This total varied from year to year, since some new houses went up while others appeared to have been torn down. In some cases, however, an address not listed in one directory might reappear in later directories. Therefore each year’s total housing equaled the number of “no listings” subtracted from 213. This number provided the base for persistence (duration of residence at the same address) in the next check period (Table 1). For example, 26 homes listed in 1913 were not listed in 1915, so the base number of homes for 1915 equaled 187. A total of 98 householders remained by 1920, so the ratio of 98 to 187 gave the persistence rate of 52.4% for 1920 (see Table 1). The figure in parentheses under “householders remaining” represents the number of 1913 householders still residing at the same address at each checkpoint. Column D of Table 1 shows the persistence rate of the 1913 neighborhood dwellers, and reveals that 19.3%, or about one-fifth of the 1913 households of the Bemis Park neighborhood remained there in 1940.

TABLE 1 PERSISTENCE RATES FOR BEMIS PARK HOUSEHOLDERS, 1913-1915				
	A Base <sup>a/</sup>	B Householders Remaining	C Persistence	D 1913 Persistence
1915	171	128 (128)	74.9	74.9
1920	187	98 (83)	52.4	48.5
1925	193	88 (57)	45.6	33.3
1931	194	119 (44)	61.3	25.7
1935	193	115 (35)	59.6	20.5
1940	195	114 (33)	58.5	19.3
<sup>a/</sup> The base number is the total of households in the previous check point year. Thus, 171 was the total in 1913, 187 was the total in 1915, etc.				

Persistence rates varied in relation to economic conditions. The high 1915 rate of 75% was probably due to the fact that only 2 years had elapsed since the previous checkpoint. However, a substantial drop in persistence occurred between 1915 and 1920, the years when America became involved in World War I. One student of mobility and its social significance, T. Earl Sullenger, remarked that greater movement always prevailed in prosperous days, “with associated unrest and instability, while in periods of depression urban populations tend toward more inertia and permanence of residence.”<sup>10</sup> This

<sup>9</sup>See Sam Bass Warner’s *Streetcar Suburbs* (New York: Atheneum, 1974), and Ray M. Northam, *Urban Geography* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1975), pp. 258-259, for a discussion of population succession in neighborhoods.  
<sup>10</sup>T. Earl Sullenger, “The Social Significance of Mobility: An Omaha Study,” *American Journal of Sociology* LV (May, 1950); p. 560.

observation held true for the Bemis Park neighborhood, which exhibited its lowest persistence rates of 52.4% and 45.6% in the prosperous years of 1920 and 1925. In direct contrast, persistence increased substantially to 61.3% in 1931, possibly influenced by the coming of the 1929 depression. Throughout the 30’s, only small changes occurred in the base number and persistence rates, dropping the latter slightly to 58.5% by 1940.

*Patterns of Persistence by Individual Families, 1915-1940.* Certain areas of the neighborhood remained extremely mobile while other areas were more stable. A large number of changes occurred in the neighborhood in 1925, as witnessed by the low persistence rate. The 3300, 3400 and 3500 blocks of Lincoln Boulevard counted 12 new residents among 14 householders in 1925. Eleven of the 14 homes held 3 or more different residents over a period of 25 years and 2 houses, at 3316 and 3512 Lincoln Boulevard, contained at least 5 different householders throughout the period.

Profiles of the families with long-term persistence provide a different perspective on the residents of Bemis Park. Throughout the study period there were pockets of persistence, small sections of the neighborhood in which people remained for the entire period. Little change came about in the 3500 block of Hawthorne Street. Gerdon W. Noble, a general agent for New England Mutual Life Insurance Company, moved into his home at 3503 Hawthorne as early as 1901, and his family remained through 1940. Long-time Omaha realtor Byron R. Hastings made his home across the street at 3506 Hawthorne throughout the entire period. Hastings got his start in Omaha real estate with pioneer Byron Reed between 1889 and 1903. In 1903 he and a partner formed Hastings and Heydon, of which he remained as president until 1953. Hastings became involved in service clubs and civic activities, serving as president of the Omaha real estate board, on the board of directors of a savings and loan association for 37 years, and as a member of the Chamber of Commerce and Knights of Ak-Sar-Ben.<sup>11</sup>

The family of E. A. Zabriskie resided at 3524 Hawthorne in a Queen Anne “gingerbread” style home built in 1888. Their residence was probably the only home standing when the Bemis Park Company formed in 1889.<sup>12</sup> Although Edgar Zabriskie died before 1913, his widow and adult son continued to live in the home for the entire period.

Notwithstanding long-term residents such as the Noble, Hastings and Zabriskie families, which remained throughout the survey period in one block, other families scattered about the neighborhood also chose to stay. This study made no comparisons between specific occupations and mobility, but a small sample of persisting individuals provided some indication of who remained. Two physicians and teachers at the University of Nebraska Medical College, Dr. Palmer Findley and Dr. Rodney Bliss, both lived on Lincoln Boulevard throughout the period examined. Two entrepreneurs who took advantage of Omaha’s agricultural market through successful grain businesses, James B. Adams and James W. Holmquist, also made their homes in Bemis Park through 1940. The list of long-term neighborhood residents was not limited to college-educated physicians or self-made men. Frank Schmerhorn, a Union Pacific Railroad clerk, moved to his home at 3315 Myrtle in 1905 and remained throughout the survey period. The family of John A. Lindell, also a clerk, resided at 1019 N. 38th through 1940.

This small cross-section of long-time residents suggests that a householder’s occupation did not influence his persistence or mobility in the Bemis Park area. Certainly this sample provides only an impression, but it serves as a prelude to a closer examination of occupations, and whether the segments of each occupation decreased or increased in the Bemis Park

<sup>11</sup>Nebraska Press Association, *Who’s Who in Nebraska* (Lincoln: Nebraska Press Association, 1940), p. 336.  
<sup>12</sup>Interview with Harold Becker, Bemis Park resident, Omaha, Nebraska, April 21, 1977. Becker, a resident of Bemis Park since 1925, recalls pictures showing the Zabriskie residence standing alone on the hill.

area throughout the survey period.  
*Occupational Characteristics of Residents, 1915-1940.* Eight categories of occupations were utilized in totaling the householder’s occupation. Professionals included doctors, lawyers, dentists, clergymen, publishers and educators of every sort. Owners and officers of companies and large business enterprises, comprised the list of large proprietors. The third category, of managers and small proprietors, contained superintendents, foremen, and supervisors, and proprietors of small establishments.<sup>13</sup> The clerical category took into account not only clerks, bookkeepers and stenographers, but also solicitors, buyers, cashiers, and agents. Skilled and unskilled labor filled two more categories. Salesmen included insurance and real estate men and an unusual group who referred to themselves as travel agents but were traveling salesmen. People in the directories classified only as householders and with no occupation were classified as retired.

An examination of occupations of Bemis Park householders between 1915 and 1940 shows a consistent rise in percentage of professionals and declines in percentage of business proprietors and sales persons (Table 2). Part of the increase in professionals could be attributed to the presence of the Methodist Episcopal Hospital and the Evangelical Lutheran Church within the neighborhood. These institutions attracted residents to the area, although only one minister served the church and most of the doctors in the district listed downtown offices. A number of nurses lived in the neighborhood, however, along with many manual helpers at the hospital. The construction of Technical High School at 33rd and Cuming in 1922 helped make Bemis Park attractive for teachers as well.

TABLE 2 OCCUPATIONAL PROFILE OF BEMIS PARK HOUSEHOLDERS, 1913-1940								
	Large Prof.	Small Prop.	Small Prop.	Clerical	Sales	Labor Skilled	Labor Unskilled	Retired
1913 (169) <sup>a/</sup>	10.1	16.6	11.2	17.2	23.7	7.1	1.2	13.0
1915 (182)	10.4	16.5	17.6	18.1	20.3	5.5	—	11.5
1920 (189)	14.3	14.3	12.7	20.6	19.0	5.8	1.1	12.2
1925 (194)	16.5	10.8	14.4	13.4	16.5	9.8	1.6	17.0
1931 (194)	17.5	5.7	15.0	12.9	15.5	13.4	3.6	16.5
1935 (206)	17.5	7.8	10.2	15.5	14.1	10.7	2.4	21.8
1940 (201)	21.4	5.0	9.5	15.9	12.5	9.9	2.9	22.9
<sup>a/</sup> Indicates occupation total for each year.								

In general, however, as a neighborhood near the central city ages, wealthy families leave the district and move to new homes in the suburbs.<sup>14</sup> While not all professionals are wealthy, they also may be expected to move as a neighborhood grows older. In that respect, the rise in percentage of Bemis Park householders who were professionals from 10.1 in 1913 to 21.4 by 1940 seems remarkable.

The most notable decline of occupational groups occurred among the large proprietors. As discussed above, the decline may be due to improved techniques of the city directories in

<sup>13</sup>Division of residents’ occupations between large and small proprietors was based on methods described Chudacoff in *Mobile Americans*, pp. 85-86. The location of the business was examined, as well as the nature of work. As an example, a grocery store in a residential area classified its owner as a small proprietor, while a wholesale hardware company in the warehouse district would have meant its owner or an officer of the company was a large proprietor. The presence of the businessman’s last name in the company name, or whether the business had officers usually indicated large proprietors. Generally more than one factor was taken into account in determining the size of a business. As directories improved over the years examined, distinctions between large and small proprietors were more easily determined.

<sup>14</sup>See Warner’s *Streetcar Suburbs* and Northam’s *Urban Geography* on population succession in cities.



determining the size of each business. But such errors would not account for an overall decline of 11.6 percentage points, which shows that the largest businessmen and company officers did move out, perhaps to newer, more modern homes on the outskirts of the City. Salesmen exhibited a similar decrease, falling from 23.7% to 12.5%. The percentages of small proprietors and clerical workers rose and then fell, but remained substantially the same over the 27 year period. The neighborhood never counted a large percentage of laborers among its inhabitants, although their numbers increased slightly.

*Householders Who Left Bemis Park, 1915-1940.* Table 3 shows the destination of Bemis Park householders who left the area between 1915 and 1940. Except for 1925 and 1931, the highest percentage of movement consisted of those who left Bemis Park but stayed within a few blocks of the neighborhood, designated as *vicinity* in Table 3. This indicated that the area was acceptable and perhaps not thought of as a way station on the trip out from the central city, but as a suitable location for making a home.

	Vicinity	NE	NW	SE	SW	Downtown	Suburban NW	Suburban SW	Not Listed
1915 <sup>b/</sup> (45)	20.0	2.2	6.7	—	8.9	17.8	11.1	2.2	31.1
1920 (81)	14.8	4.9	11.1	4.9	9.9	4.9	12.4	—	37.1
1925 (102)	13.7	5.9	16.7	3.9	11.8	1.0	6.8	2.9	37.3
1931 (75)	6.7	1.3	10.7	—	8.0	1.3	14.7	5.3	52.0
1935 (77)	19.5	5.2	10.4	2.6	7.8	—	9.1	2.6	42.8
1940 (85)	22.4	4.7	5.9	2.3	5.9	—	7.1	3.5	48.2

<sup>a/</sup>Subarea Boundaries: *Vicinity* - bounded by California, Franklin, 30th and 42nd Streets; *Northeast* - east of 24th, north of Dodge; *Northwest* - 24th to 48th, north of Dodge; *Southeast* - east of 24th, south of Dodge; *Southwest* - 24th to 48th, south of Dodge; *Downtown* - Central Business District; *Northwest Suburban* - west of 48th (1913 City Limit), north of Dodge; *Southwest Suburban* - west of 48th, south of Dodge. *Not Listed* includes former residents who left the Omaha area and those who could not be traced for other reasons.

<sup>b/</sup>Indicates total number of moves for each year.

Of householders who moved beyond the immediate vicinity, the northwest suburbs in the Dundee and Benson area gained a higher percentage of former Bemis Park residents than older districts east of 24th Street, receiving a high of 14.7% of those who left in 1931. In comparison, the movement to downtown apartments fell from 17.8% in 1915 to 0 in 1935 and 1940, clearly showing the City's movement westward to new housing areas.

The largest percentage in each study year was found among former householders who left the City, were missed by the directory, or had a name too common to trace. The depression year of 1931 marked the high point of "no listings," when over half of the 1925 householders who left could not be traced. The depression caused many people to move in search of work, yet this neighborhood contained few laborers in that situation. The percentage could be high because of the 6 year interval between check periods, yet this would not account for the entire jump from 37.3% to 52.0%.

*Bemis Park in the 1930's and 1940's.* The information about Bemis Park householders and their occupations obtained from the survey of city directories relates clearly to other contemporary accounts of the district. The sociology department at the University of Omaha under the direction of T. Earl Sullenger in the early 1930's completed a number of mobility studies on the City. One survey investigated mobility over the entire City in 1927 through 1929. The average intra-urban mobility for the entire City over the 3 year period totaled

20%; in other words, one-fifth of the households moved in the 3 years. The percentage of mobility divided by wards showed an average of 8% change for Ward 10, which encompassed the Bemis Park neighborhood. Mobility in Ward 10 was lower than that found in 7 of the 12 wards.<sup>15</sup> (This data must be viewed cautiously, because in 1927-29, Ward 10 covered an area that ran west of Bemis Park through Dundee and Fairacres. Bemis Park, on the eastern edge of the tract, was perhaps closer in makeup to the areas on its border than to the Dundee-Fairacres district.)

Sullenger's 1938 study, based on the 1930 census, examined an area only slightly larger than the Bemis Park neighborhood. Sullenger referred to the Bemis Park neighborhood as "one of Omaha's better districts," with Bemis Park and the Walnut Hill Reservoir adding to the vicinity's beauty. The area was not an ethnic neighborhood: Scandinavians, mostly Swedish, counted ten families, while there were five each of Russian and Dutch. Two black women provided the only racial difference in the section. In terms of neighborhood problems, the vicinity recorded more cases of suicide than adult crime. A comparison with other districts showed the Bemis suicide rate to be only slightly higher than neighborhoods in the surrounding area.<sup>16</sup> The study also suggested the changing racial character of the area, as a few blacks were beginning to move into the section directly north of the Bemis Park neighborhood.

Magdalene Pickens completed a similar study for 1942-45. Pickens' identification of "better" and transitional areas in the City was the most valuable part of her study. The Bemis Park location was identified as neither a "better" nor a transitional zone, but again, the study areas were census tracts and any comments about the Bemis Park tract dealt with a region much larger than the neighborhood.

Her findings suggest, however, that Bemis Park was becoming less stable by the mid-1940's. The number of moves in the entire City per tract between 1942 and 1945 period averaged 345; the number of moves into the 2 tracts containing Bemis Park totaled 411 and 406. The 2 sections ranked 18th and 19th in terms of moves into 60 tracts. Neither half appeared to be growing very much; between 1942 and 1945, only 3 new houses went up in the eastern division of Bemis Park, while 11 were erected in the western part. Pickens classified the tract encompassing the eastern half of the park as an interstitial zone, one which composes the fringe along the outer edge of the zone in transition.<sup>17</sup> This classification implied that the Bemis Park area would soon become a transition zone and face the problems of disorganization believed inherent in such a change.

## Bemis Park Today

By the 1950's and 1960's the neighborhood changed as many of the old residents died and their homes were sold. During this period the neighborhood became racially integrated. The increased mobility contributed to a decline in the sense of neighborhood cohesiveness. Many larger dwellings were subdivided into apartments, which brought increased numbers of cars, more trash, and less concern with upkeep. Some dwellings deteriorated to the point that they were torn down, leaving vacant lots in the area. A neighborhood organization was formed in the 1950's, but dissolved as residents lost interest.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup>T. Earl Sullenger, *Studies in Urban Sociology* (Omaha: Bureau of Social Research, Dept. of Sociology, Municipal University of Omaha, 1933), pp. 1-6.

<sup>16</sup>T. Earl Sullenger, *An Ecological Study of Omaha* (Omaha: Bureau of Social Research, Dept. of Sociology, Municipal University of Omaha, 1938), p. 45-50.

<sup>17</sup>Magdalene Pickens, "A Study of Intra-Urban Mobility in Omaha," (unpublished M.A. Thesis, Municipal University of Omaha, 1947), pp. 16, 19, 46, 86.

<sup>18</sup>Interview with Arthur Schmad, long-time resident of the Bemis Park neighborhood, on July 12, 1978.

The 1970 Census revealed that the total population of the neighborhood had increased by 1.7% since 1960, and the number of housing units by 1.3%. There had been deterioration, but no severe decline in population and housing stock as in other North Omaha districts. Bemis Park is not immune to the problems of vacant lots, crime and apathy that face every inner city neighborhood. But the positive response of residents to these problems deserves examination.

Bemis Park has become a popular location for many young families who desire to live in older, central city neighborhoods because of their character, or proximity to work. The Bemis Park neighborhood contains 231 units, 153 owner occupied and 78 rental. In Bemis Park, owners occupied 40% of all homes in 1970, a percentage which has been maintained through 1977. In one large block of the neighborhood, 36th to 38th, Lafayette to Cuming, home ownership increased from 40% in 1970 to 60% by 1977.<sup>19</sup>

*1978 Survey of Residents.* In order to determine the character of the Bemis Park neighborhood today, an update survey was conducted, using the 1978 Omaha city directory.<sup>20</sup> The survey indicated 265 householders. Of the 231 dwellings, 181 or 78% were single-family houses. The 27 multi-family dwellings contained 104 households. The remaining 23 dwellings were listed as vacant.

Householders were categorized into 8 occupational divisions. These include professional, technical and managerial; clerical and sales; service; skilled and unskilled workers; and "other occupations," which included residents who failed to give clear enough information about their work to be categorized. In addition, new residents were totaled, as identified by the directory. Three categories accommodated other conditions in the Bemis Park neighborhood: students, retired and householders.<sup>21</sup> In each dwelling unit, only the householder's occupation was tabulated. Table 4 shows the results of these findings.

TABLE 4 1978 OCCUPATIONS OF BEMIS PARK HOUSEHOLDERS		
Occupational Category	Number of Householders	Percentage
Professional, Technical, Managerial	67	25.3
Clerical, Sales	24	9.1
Service	26	9.8
Skilled-Unskilled Occupations	17	6.4
Student	12	4.5
Retired	38	14.3
Householder (No Occupation Listed)	62	23.4
Other Occupations	19	7.2
Total	265	100.0

The greatest number of householders (25%) were categorized in professional, technical, and managerial occupations. Teachers, health professionals, social workers, owners of businesses, and company officers are a few of those in this group. Another 23% of residents were classified as householders. Retired individuals totaled 14% of respondents, while another 10% were persons engaged in service occupations, such as waitresses, janitors, porters and security guards.

A high percentage of professionals was also found in the survey of early householders. Table 2 shows about 21% of the householders were professionals in 1940. Because occupational categories for the 1913-1940 table differ slightly from the 1978 classification, the percentages are not directly comparable. The professional category in Table 2 was separate from large and small proprietors, who are included as professionals under

<sup>19</sup>*Bemis Park Revitalization*, publication of Omaha City Housing and Community Development Department, 1978.

<sup>20</sup>This survey included a slightly larger area than the earlier study, including the residents west of 38th Street, and dwellings on the south side of Hamilton Street, approximately 45 more inhabited dwellings.

<sup>21</sup>Retired and Householders were separated in this survey, unlike the study of 1913-1940, because the distinctions seemed more reliable in 1978 than in the directories of 40-50 years ago.

the Department of Labor classifications in the 1978 update survey. If the professional, technical and managerial categories in Table 2 were totaled, they would equal approximately 36%, as compared to 25% of 1978 householders.

The update survey also revealed that new residents occupied 98 dwelling units in Bemis Park in the 1978 directory.<sup>22</sup> Of the 98 new householders, 44 were apartment dwellers, while 54 were residents moving into homes. The number of people moving in indicates an interest in the neighborhood and available homes. Yet this number of people moving in may also indicate a transitory population. The 54 new residents moving into homes make up approximately 23% of the 231 units. Some of these new residents bought homes, but the number of people moving also shows an unsettled population, unlikely to be interested in contributing substantially to the neighborhood. Some of this fluidity may be attributed to the proximity of the area to Creighton and the new St. Joseph's Hospital, with students renting houses and apartments. The Bemis Park Neighborhood Association supported a zoning change in the district which forbids the conversion of any more homes to multi-family dwellings in an effort to reduce the size of the transition population.

*The Bemis Park Neighborhood Association.* Since its beginning in 1975, the Bemis Park Neighborhood Association has expanded with new committees and activities. Projects have included participation in the City rodent control program, a paint discount program and a park improvement committee concentrating on the three parks in the neighborhood, Walnut Hill, Bemis and Mercer Parks. A big hurdle to overcome has been the development of a sense of community. The Association continues to sponsor activities such as a flea market and a hobby show, which allow residents to become acquainted with each other. The Association actively promoted Project Embrace, an after school and summer program of learning activities for school age children, held at nearby churches. Another attempt to build community feeling is a garden planted in a neighborhood vacant lot. Primarily organized for children, the garden provides a place for residents to meet and for youngsters to learn gardening skills.

The community garden supplies a partial answer to another neighborhood problem: vacant lots. Old neighborhoods such as Bemis Park often have vacant lots that are neglected by absentee owners and attract weeds or trash. One of the first concerns of the organization in 1975, many lots are now maintained by a special committee and others by residents who use them for gardens.

Two other committees are currently in operation. The tool committee lends a lawn mower and other tools to residents lacking their own equipment. A crime prevention committee notes crime in the area and the response to it by authorities, while attempting to resolve any problems that can be dealt with on a neighborhood level. They recently published an information sheet on crime prevention and have explored methods for funding crime prevention programs.

The Bemis Park Neighborhood Association provided the initiative for a companion organization, The Bemis Park Improvement Corporation. This nonprofit corporation was organized in February, 1976, to purchase, rehabilitate and resell deteriorating and vacant homes in the neighborhood. No-interest loans made by neighborhood residents purchased the first two properties. Additional funding from the Greater Omaha Corporation, a consortium of financial institutions providing funds for housing rehabilitation, allowed the Corporation to pay back taxes and bring the property up to FHA standards. The Corporation

<sup>22</sup>In each case, only one new resident per dwelling unit was counted. Since the directory does not list dependent children under age 18 it is impossible to know the number of family members. Thus, a family moving into a home was classified as one new resident. A home converted to 4 apartments could have 4 new residents in a year.

demolished one house and cleaned, repaired and painted the second home. Lots cleared through Corporation actions have also been sold to adjoining property owners. The first neighborhood group to receive funding from the Greater Omaha Corporation, the Improvement Corporation has currently purchased a third property which it plans to rehabilitate. The Corporation also hopes to interest individuals in new construction on some of the vacant lots.

The Neighborhood Association also sought help from the City in improving their neighborhood. They requested Community Development Block Grant funds (CDBG) for repair of sidewalks, tree planting and home rehabilitation. In 1978, the City allocated \$21,000 in CDBG funds to the Association, with \$9,855 from City funds and \$4,875 assessed from residents used for sidewalks and other public improvements. The remainder of the funding will be utilized for rehabilitation. Neighborhood residents who qualify are eligible to receive rehabilitation grants. Other residents may apply for HUD Section 312 loans for neighborhood revitalization.

### Summary and Conclusion

The Bemis Park neighborhood was developed in the early 1890's by George Bemis as a 60 acre tract surrounded by three parks. Of the 171 households identified in Bemis Park in 1913, one-fifth were still in the area in 1940. Many residents moved in and out of Bemis Park during the 1920's but hard times in the 1930's encouraged greater stability. One-third of the residents studied in 1915 owned businesses, 20% were clerical workers, 20% sales personnel, 10% professionals and the remainder were laborers or retired. By 1940, professionals and retired people increased to more than 20% respectively and the other occupation categories decreased correspondingly. Residents who left Bemis Park during these years most often moved within a few blocks of the neighborhood, although some migrated westward toward Benson and Dundee.

During the 1950's and 1960's there was little change in the total population of the area, but some of the original residences were demolished or subdivided, and the increasingly transient population and growing number of vacant lots brought deterioration in the appearance of the neighborhood. Between 1960 and 1970, both population and number of housing units remained stable.

In 1978, Bemis Park has 265 households. Nearly 80% of

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